

Working Paper Series

MANAGING ORGANIZATIONAL CONFLICT:

A Place for Collaboration, Bargaining and Power Approaches

by

C. Brooklyn Derr



THE HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT RESEARCH PROGRAM
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- * This paper is to be published in the California Management Review in a forthcoming special issue on conflict management.

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MANAGING ORGANIZATIONAL CONFLICT:

A PLACE FOR COLLABORATION, BARGAINING AND POWER APPROACHES

Introduction

Conflicts are normal and natural consequences of human interaction in organizational settings. They occur for several reasons: internal stress coming from the person and overlapping into the workplace, incompatible expectations among workers and work groups, differences over task procedure, values, orientations and desired outcomes, increasing interdependencies and workloads, and external pressures and crises.

For example, the author is well-acquainted with a large urban school district in which serious conflicts occur between two Associate Superintendents. One party to the dispute appears to be experiencing intrapersonal stress as a result of a pending divorce and is often overly sensitive and angry. Superintendent A desires his colleague to deliver special reports to his division on a weekly basis, but Superintendent B claims that he cannot comply due to a work overload. One of these Superintendents views all problems rationally-technically from a data systems point of view. The other is incensed and continuously faults him for "not thinking humanistically about the needs of the kids." Moreover, pressures from the courts for forced bussing have put an enormous burden on the Superintendent in charge of planning and systems. He frequently arrives at 7:00 a.m. and leaves the office at 6:00 p.m. He works on the weekends. While he believes in long-range planning, he sees himself in a "reactive" mode. He resents his colleague's accusations that he could beat the problem if he were better organized and more "proactive."

This is an article for conflict managers who want to try a variety of methods to manage their serious disputes which, like the one above, may have

multiple causes. A contingency approach to conflict management is suggested to provide managers with a conceptual framework for knowing what to do when.

This article may be different from the other papers because it considers the costs and feasibility of successful conflict management implementation. A contingency approach also stresses realistic constraints and complexities which are important for practical but workable conflict management methods. The other contributions emphasize either the desirability of a particular mode of dispute settlement or an optimal level of conflict.

Three Conflict Management Modes

This article will focus upon three major conflict management modes from which one can draw to formulate a situational theory appropriate to important problems and disputes disrupting an organization. These are: Collaboration, Bargaining and Power-play. Walton has already outlined the differences between collaboration and bargaining approaches.¹ Table 1 presents a modification of his ideas, with the addition of power-play, which serves to contrast the three conflict management approaches.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Tabular schemes such as the one in the table inevitably fail to account for overlaps. In reality, much of what is listed as collaboration also occurs in bargaining, and power-play also overlaps with bargaining. The table does serve to highlight basic differences, however.

None of these three conflict modes is appropriate for every contingency; neither is any one used without consequence. Following is a brief description of each mode with its possible cost, benefits, and requirements:

COLLABORATION: Collaborative theory maintains that people should surface their differences (get them out in the open) and then work on the problems until

they have attained mutually satisfactory solutions. The approach assumes that people will be motivated to expend the time and energy for such problem-solving activity. It tries to exploit the possible mutual gains of the parties in the dispute and views the conflict as a creative force pushing them to achieve an improved state of affairs to which both sides are fully committed. Information is openly and willingly exchanged.² When the parties stagnate because they are too close to the situation to perceive viable alternatives or are too protective of their own positions, a third-party consultant may be used to help clarify the problem, sharpen the issues, find commonalities and, in general, help them to discover a win-win position.³

Essentially, collaborationists argue that theirs is the most preferred strategy for the good of the enterprise because: (1) open and honest interaction promotes authentic interpersonal relations; (2) conflict is used as a creative force for innovation and improvement; (3) this process enhances feedback and information flow, and (4) problem-solving disputes has a way of improving the climate of the organization so that there is more openness, trust, risktaking and good feelings of integrity.⁴

However, in my consulting experience I have found that collaboration is not always useful nor feasible. Collaboration seems best employed when a combination of factors exist which assure the method some reasonable degree of success. Four major conditions which help determine the practicality of the collaborative mode follow.

First, a moderately high degree of required interdependence is important to force parties to expend the time and energy necessary to work their differences. Openly confronting the issues is hard work and not likely to occur unless there is a long-term stake in developing and preserving the relationship.

Second, seeking collaborative solutions to conflicts involves more than simply acting together in role to accomplish a task and reach an objective. It also requires having a real and equal stake in the outcome and feeling free enough to interact openly, including conflicting, in the collaborative relationship. A kind of power parity must exist which allows the parties to feel free to interact candidly and use all of their resources to further their beliefs and concerns (regardless of their superior-subordinate status).

Third, there must be mutual self-interests in solving the specific dispute. The person or group in conflict must experience a "felt" need that leads him/it to want to work on the issue involved. This is related to the two requisites cited above. But in addition to a compelling reason and feeling enough parity to be able to collaborate, the parties themselves must perceive some significant motivation concerning the issue at hand. Their motivation often depends on whether the mutual gains are self-evident.

When there is required interdependence, power parity and a felt need provoking the will to engage in the process, then the fourth factor comes into play. It is the extent to which there is organizational support for such behavior. Considerable organizational resources are needed to effectively manage conflict using the collaborative strategy. Such a program usually requires a commitment of time, money and energy. For example, the organization (including top executives) should engage in a collaborative mode system-wide, so that the norms, rewards and punishments of the enterprise will encourage such behavior. Most people are unaccustomed to open disagreement, especially with someone of higher organizational rank, and need assurance that such behavior will not draw reprisals.

To confront one another effectively and emerge having resolved a problem also requires an investment in personal skills. Learning how to communicate effectively, how to synchronize the process, when and how to use a third party, how to engage in effective problem-solving, and how to keep the tension level moderate for optimal results requires skills that can be taught but may not have already been learned. Indeed, many organizations would view such constructive openness as deviant. The enterprise should be sufficiently committed to fund training for building skills to manage conflicts via collaboration.

Thus, it has become apparent to me that the implementation of collaboration is often either infeasible (i.e. the right conditions do not exist for it to work) or too costly to be justifiable. Accordingly, it becomes important to re-examine other, alternative modes from the viewpoint of their benefits, costs and feasibilities as they are related to the desired outcomes.

POWER-PLAY: Collaborationists often view power-play as diametrically opposed to their own values and theory. Power-play, they say, will harm both the individual and the enterprise. It (1) unleashes aggressive behaviors and hostile feelings between those involved in the power struggle, shutting off communication and interaction; (2) promotes vicious gossip which in turn distorts the valid information needed to successfully manage; (3) drives needed information underground, as power-play is secretive and there is little opportunity for feedback and learning from experience; (4) subverts the corporate mission through acts of sabotage and non-compliance; and (5) displaces goals because much of the energy employed fighting the power struggle is diverted from more productive causes; in fact, winning the struggle can become a more important end than achieving an organizational goal.⁵

Much of the fear of power-play is connected with what Rapoport called the "cataclysmic" view of conflict -- that power struggles are necessarily unmanageable, irrational and destructive. Although some escalated power struggles fit this description, Rapoport reminds us that the use of power strategies is often "strategic" -- characterized by both rational self-interest and control.⁶

A number of considerations suggest that power-play is an appropriate method of conflict management in many situations. First, there is a view of individuals which says that they act first and foremost in their own self-interest and play an active power game to protect that interest. This view is increasing in popularity, reflected in the increased frequency of books on power in both the professional and popular literatures.⁷ Many people perceive that they can win more by competing than they can by collaborating. Or, they do not feel comfortable or skilled at problem solving while they may feel particularly good, given their social experience, at power-play. Perhaps one has primary outside-the-organization interests and does not want to be highly involved or committed to his work; hence, it is not in his interest to get highly involved collaborating.

Individuals typically play one or a combination of three different power games which strive for different types of power:

Authority is the power which is delegated by the organization to the holder of a certain position. Formal authority, results in the ability to use rewards, punishments, and other organizational resources in order to impact on persons and to affect behavior. Much has been written about positional power or authority.⁸

Informal influence is normally defined as being able to affect behavior or gain compliance without holding a position of authority. Not everyone in authority has influence. Some persons have little or no authority but much influence. Some have influence far greater than that normally associated with their official role. It is possible to become influential in the enterprise without necessarily ascending the formal hierarchy.⁹

Autonomy. Unlike the other power intents described above, autonomy power derives from the need to be in control of oneself and to minimize unwanted influence by others. It is manifested in ones ability to resist formal authority (control) and informal influence (normative demands) and to have ample "space" to accomplish prescribed ends using unrestricted means. Highly trained professionals, for example, seek autonomy, are little supervised and are accountable for the quality of their end products (e.g. a surgical operation, a scholarly book, an architectural plan).¹⁰

Individuals who strive for autonomy power may be very interested in building and protecting a piece of organizational territory. They become indispensable in this domain. They are the experts, have the information and hold unquestioned power. Autonomy-oriented persons may also have extra-organizational interests (e.g. a civic or religious organization) or parallel-organizational interests (e.g. a professional association) and wish to remain "free" from organizational commitments and/or constraints in order to devote more time to those activities.

Power-play, it is hypothesized, will be the dominant conflict management strategy for those who seek autonomy. It has been pointed out elsewhere that it is unpolitical in organizations to appear uncooperative and anti-system. One must appear to act in the best interest of the enterprise.¹¹ Those endeavors which are most self-interest oriented, in which the interests of the

worker and the organization are least congruent, require the most covert means. To be discovered as being aloof or free from the rules would cause a very negative career-damaging impression. Autonomy is an unpopular intent in most organizations because marginality is discouraged and total commitment is rewarded. Power-play is a more secretive mode which could work in the best interests of those whose covert objective is autonomy and whose desired impression is that of being committed. Collaboration requires the open sharing of personal intents, means for achieving them and the process of finding a mutually satisfactory solution. Moreover, one is usually perceived as committed to what he helps to decide regardless of how devious were his real intentions.

Second, collaborating can be perceived as increasing vulnerability in competitive external environments. There are significant aspects of conflict of interest between those firms which transact business directly or compete for resources, just as there are aspects of conflict of interest between managers within a firm over promotion and resources. Collaboration, and even bargaining, assumes the exchange of information necessary to resolve a problem. This information may apprise competitor of weaknesses and give them an unfair advantage. For example, disclosing strategic information (a key power-play resource) might provide another organization with data for increasing its efficiency, and therefore its competitive advantage.

Third, in some situations power-play strategies contribute to the joint welfare of two contributing parties. Under conditions of routine and certainty, for example, the self-interests of the individual and the enterprise may be incompatible. To maximize its objectives, the enterprise increases its efficiency via elaborate planning and control systems. The employees may likewise improve their working conditions via inclusive union contracts. Power-play is

the mechanism of flexibility used by both sides to cope within the confines of the rules (which are never so tightly delineated as to disallow some manipulation). Employees can use power-play to resist machine-like control; employers can use power-play to cope with union contracts during periods of uncertainty (e.g. rearranging work, laying off, calling for a common response to a crisis). There exists a sort of dynamic equilibrium which works to the advantage of both within the rules. It is the dynamic interaction of finding matching self-interests which is the substance of power-play conflict management. Such a mode allows multiple motives and various methods to eventually find a satisfactory equilibrium. Some activities are temporarily blocked as the power struggles are waged. Yet, these are normally periods of re-alignment, reform and adjustment. In the long-term, they may be effective ways to manage differences for the greatest number of persons and for the enterprise.

Fourth, power-play is often best suited to decide ideological disputes. When values or philosophies clash, the parties are usually intransigent in their conflicting positions. They refuse to problem solve or even negotiate. The only recourse is for one to try to win at the expense of the other, although both may emerge saving some face and being "right" for having taken their stand.

BARGAINING: While neither party may emerge completely satisfied and one party may be clearly dissatisfied under this mode, both will at least come to terms openly about how to best resolve the most immediate issues. Bargaining can be a more or less elaborate mode of conflict management depending on the situation (from interpersonal trading to collective negotiation). The important point is that, like collaboration, a common solution to a problem can be found. The actual act of trading and compromising highlights the assumed strength and influence of each party. In this process, the power position of each side is

clearly defined in direct ratio to the information it reveals to the other, the concessions it makes, the punishment or penalties it can impose.

Bargaining, while remaining unique, contains elements which overlap with both collaboration and power.¹² It resembles the collaborative process because it is a systematic method which, in some of its forms, allows for collaboration between negotiators. Bargaining also contains many aspects of the strategic win-lose power struggles more typical in power-play. Figure 1 illustrates this point.

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE.

Bargaining, therefore, can be viewed as a "connecting bridge" between the collaborative and power strategies of conflict management.

Bargaining employs some of the methods, values and motivational forces used in each of the other modes. Bargaining is a middle-ground orientation in which both power-players and collaborationists may feel somewhat comfortable. There is little hope that they could deal effectively with one another each using their own incongruent approaches. Bargaining neutralizes the values of the conflict manager so that he does not impose one set of assumptions (e.g. collaboration) on a very different situation (e.g. power-play). In the Organization Development movement, for example, many instances of failure were reported where collaborative values and methods of dispute settlement were superimposed on power settings.¹⁶ It is proposed herein that bargaining would have better matched the intervention situation.

Bargaining might also be viewed as an intervention bridge to either elevate a power-play situation from a covert "lose-lose" condition to a situation in which both parties have at least made an explicit --- albeit "hard" or power-based --- agreement in their mutual interest. Or, using this bridge concept,

it is a realistic alternative to fall back to when the conditions are not present for collaboration. Figure 2 illustrates this last point.

INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE.

Those who favor the collaborative approach would argue that bargaining is of limited value because (1) it often creates new interpersonal-organizational conflicts by virtue of the win-lose strategies employed; (2) the commitments to resolutions adopted are formal (based on having to prove that an agreement has been violated rather than intrinsic and are, therefore, often carried out only according to the letter of the law; and (3) no more than one, perhaps neither, of the parties emerge fully satisfied.

On the other hand, bargaining seems to work well in many situations. It is, for example, a good way to establish power parity so that more collaboration can follow. Just getting into a trading position assumes some equality, as each side recognizes that the other has something of value to offer and/or withhold.

Scarce resources can often be bargained according to the strategies of important interest groups, whereas they are not easily distributed using the collaborative method. Tradeoffs where some win and some lose according to a criterion of importance seem optimally suited to deal with conditions of scarcity.

Some persons or groups feel skillful at and comfortable with bargaining. It fits their personal style. Moreover, bargaining is somewhat economical in that parties meet only periodically to review the old contract and to recontract.

In summary, I have seen that many attempts to manage conflicts using more overt (collaboration) or covert (power) means have worked when they matched the situation. Bargaining is a "connecting bridge" mode which could serve in either

situation. It is useful in power-play as a way to at least arrive at an explicit and agreeable resolution. It is useful in collaboration as a more realistic backup approach. It also has its own merit.

Conclusion

It is assumed that a wide variety of organizational conflicts will occur quite naturally. Many of them will promote creative tensions which lead to system improvement. Some will serve the interests of various parties and groups without disrupting the organization itself. Others will be of such import that they must be effectively managed.

This article attempts to make the point that there is no one-best-way to manage organizational conflicts. The collaborative approach has been in vogue during the past few years but has proven inadequate on numerous occasions. This article has outlined three very different modes, one of which (power-play) is in sharp contrast with collaboration but optimal under some conditions.

In considering the use of these three modes, it is vital to separate our appreciation of organizational realities from the humanistic and sometimes utopian values which have impacted the field. Conflict modes must be tailored to the actual motives, issues, and organizational circumstances of the conflict parties. Inappropriate application of collaboration or other modes by a conflict manager, however well-intentioned, is apt to be ineffective at best -- and destructive to one or both parties or to the organization at worst.

The following conclusions have been drawn:

Collaboration may be best employed when work relations would be substantially damaged by a given unresolved conflict, when the parties in conflict can openly confront their differences and state their preferences without fear of reprisal (there exists power parity in the relationship), when there is evident mutual interest in solving the dispute, and when the organization supports the open surfacing and working of disagreements.

Bargaining seems to work best to establish power parity (usually between competing people or groups), as a means of distributing scarce resources, and as a somewhat economical option for achieving a formal agreement to a common dispute. Bargaining may also be the most effective way to manage a dispute between two parties who each use one of the two other modes (collaboration, power-play) and are, therefore, unable to reach a common solution due to the disparity between them. Bargaining is often a mid-way or "bridge" strategy.

Power-play, on the other hand, is an important way to cope with conflicts for the autonomous; advantages those who are most adept at this mode; is a means for achieving a dynamic balance of competing forces, and is often the best way to resolve ideological disputes.

There is a need to know much more about power-play. One major problem has been to find an appropriate method for studying it. Since information is power and power is secretive, few will divulge their power game to researchers. Also, being "political" or "selfish" is usually a negative organizational image which requires covert rather than overt methods of power-play so as to not be discovered and badly viewed. Very few empirical studies document the dynamics of power-play. However, it is also very probable that the collaborative ethic in our field has discouraged research efforts on the uses of power-play in organizations, despite the fact that it appears to be the method most frequently used to resolve a number of kinds of differences. It is clear that more accurate descriptive theories of conflict management will require more extensive studies of the realities of power-play.

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* Ken, please put your reference in the Handbook here. I don't have it.

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TABLE 1

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT CHARACTERISTICS:
COLLABORATION-BARGAINING-POWER-PLAY

Characteristic	Collaboration	Bargaining	Power-Play
Overall Objective	1. Seeking win-win position.	1. Seeking compromise or win-lose position.	1. Seeking win-lose.
Strategic Objective	2. Emphasis on problem solving conflicts & using energy effectively.	2. Emphasis on inducing & using conflicts for better bargaining positions.	2. Emphasis on coping with & using conflicts to better ones power position
View of Man	3. Man is open, honest, trusting, collaborative.	3. Man is united in the face of a common enemy.	3. Man acts primarily in his own self-interest.
Type of Settlement	4. Psychological contracts.	4. Legal contracts.	4. Informal or un-stated contracts.
Individual's Relationship to Organization	5. Overall improvement orientation for the common good.	5. Purposeful in pursuing goals of the group.	5. Pure self-interest with a sense of limits.
Efficiency/Effectiveness	6. Effective but inefficient use of conflict energy.	6. Periodically ineffective & inefficient use of energy.	6. Efficient but ineffective use of energy.
Information Use	7. Information openly shared.	7. Information strategically shared.	7. Secrecy or Distortion.
Problem-Solving Mechanism	8. Joint problem solving.	8. Trade-offs on positions to which there is apparent commitment.	8. Unilateral, reciprocal manipulations to maximize self-interests.
Power Relationship	9. Power parity.	9. Struggle for parity.	9. Power inequalities accepted.
Parties Support of Organizational Decisions	10. Voluntary support. (Internal Commitment)	10. Contractual support. (Legal Agreement)	10. No support. (Free to Subvert)

Figure 1
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN STRATEGIES

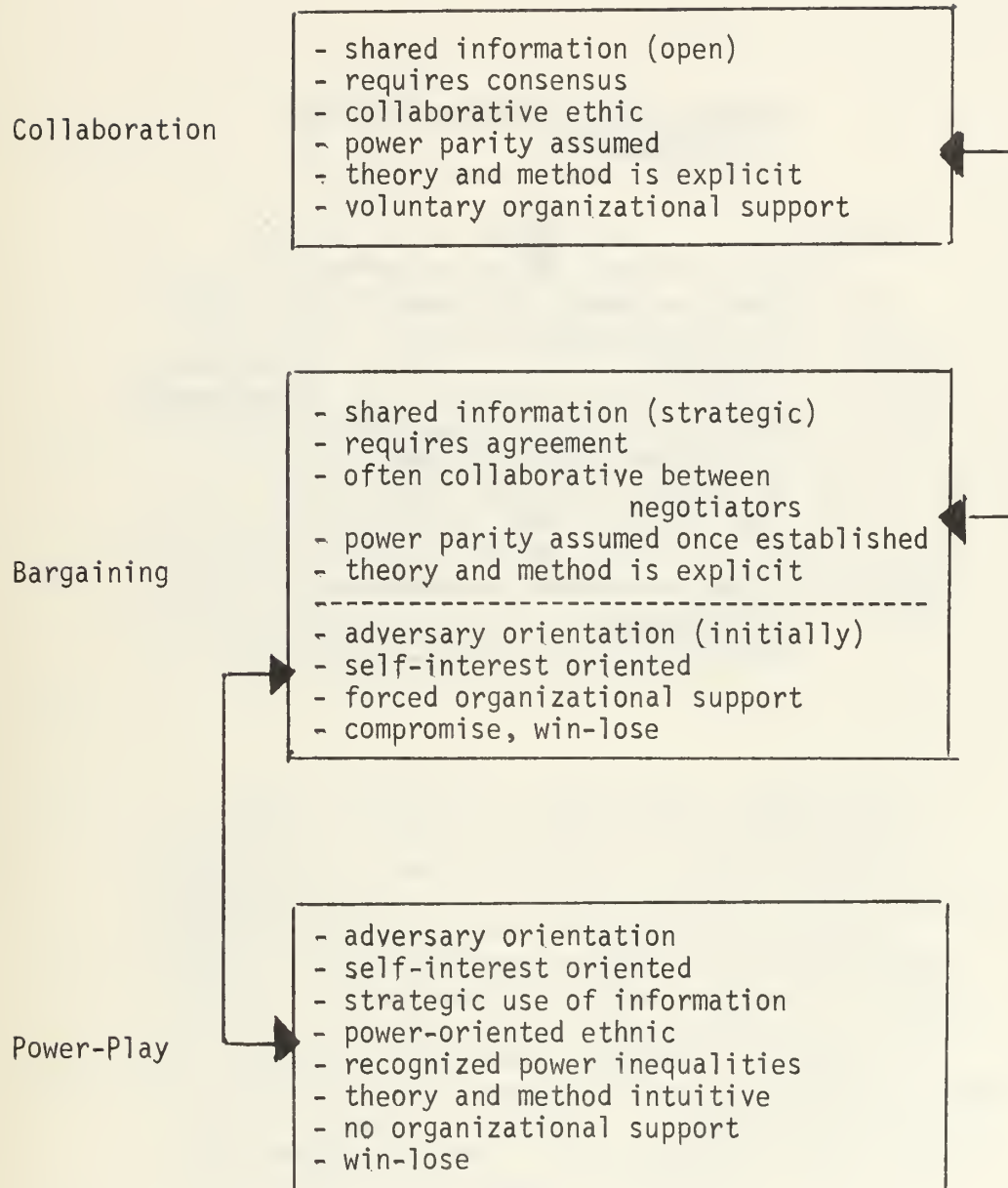
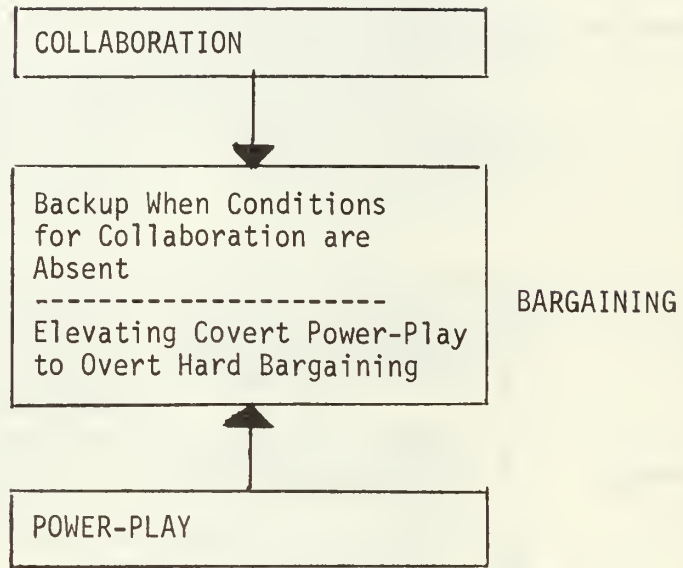


Figure 2
AN INTERVENTION BRIDGE



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